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ABSTRACT

Teaching composition as involving merely syntax and paragraph structure has no clear relation to an education in the liberal arts or to significant growth in understanding. Work in mechanics needs to be subordinated to the communicative and logological (how words act rather than their content) functions of language. One hopeful approach to teaching composition is expressed by Kenneth Burke in "A Grammar of Motives," where he calls for writers to work not only with a grammar of syntax but also with a grammar of motives. He gives the composition theorist a way of anchoring all levels of the writing process in a dialectical process in which powers of manipulation become powers of understanding. Burke uses the writing of William James to illustrate what he means: language is a map of the mind because language does not merely refer to the world, it creates one. In adopting a logological attitude, the writer finds that language is infused with action and there is a dramatic interplay between thinker and ideas: the thinker is exhorted while ideas produce, enable, possess, admonish, and suspend. The kind of verbal world that is alive to the drama of word choice is much more open to discovery, insight, and learning than is the world of language as mechanics. (TJ)

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The William James Connection: Kenneth Burke and the Dialectics of Discourse

Philip M. Keith

Most composition teachers have probably given up a long time ago on the hope of developing an "artful" or "literary" style in their students, and have settled merely for the stylistic ideal of utilitarian transparency, the "simple and direct." Yet it may be worth while asking if having students write only in the utilitarian style is really the most efficient way of teaching them to write in any style, utilitarian or otherwise. Rhetoricians have long know that stylistic transparency is the art that conceals art, the most difficult of all styles to master. This difficulty may be a major reason for the general failure of most composition instruction to develop effective writing skills in the college and professional population at large. Relying mostly on the maxims of professional writers, maxims that are simply polishing tools for the already articulated essay, composition teachers do little more than wish this style on the student by telling him to avoid nominalizations, abstraction and the passive. As a pedagogical method, this ~~have~~ has been an educational disaster. The student really needs to study the workings and misworkings of language in a more pragmatic way.

Kenneth Burke seems to me to offer a much more hopeful direction when he takes as his essential concern in A

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Grammar of Motives and elsewhere the "transformations and embarrassments of expression"[1]; not "how to write well"--God certainly knows that there is a multitude of ways to do that--but how what one writes can shift and bushwhack both reader and writer. For Burke, the writer who is in control of his medium must be working not only with a grammar of syntax, but also a grammar of motives. The ramifications of this notion are complex,[2] but for our purposes it should be enough to observe that it allows Burke to refer not merely to syntactical operations, but to logical or dialectical operations as well.[3] Burke thus gives the composition theorist a way of anchoring all levels of the writing process--discovery, writing and rewriting--in a single broad dialectical process in which powers of manipulation become powers of understanding. Burke's method provides, I think, a possible base for a more coherent theory of composition than that which underlies most of the texts in the field. In this essay, I will attempt to elaborate on this opinion by taking a look at Burke at work as a reader and discourse analyst, and then by applying the insights gained to outline a rough approach to teaching composition.

* *

There is an important moment for the composition teacher early in the first part of A Grammar of Motives when Burke takes on a passage from a letter William James wrote to his

father, challenging the elder James's attempt to distinguish Creation, Pantheism and Magic. If Creation is not one or the other, the younger James is asking, what is it?

> Now I don't see what the word "creation" can mean if this arbitrariness and magic be totally excluded, or what there is to justify its discrimination from pantheism. Creation, emanation, have at all times been opposed to pantheism, immanence; and it is evident from the scorn with which you always mention pantheism that you, too, place a broad gulf between them. The essence of the pantheistic conception, if I understand it, consists in there being a necessary relation between Creator and creature, so that both are the same fact viewed from opposite sides, and their duality as Creator and creature becomes merged in a higher unity as Being. Consequently a conception really opposed to pantheism must necessarily refuse to admit any such ratio as this,--any such external ratio,--so to speak, between them; must deny that each term exists only by virtue of the equation to which it belongs; the Creator must be the all, and the act by which the creature is set over against him has its motive within the creative circumference. The act must therefore necessarily contain an arbitrary and magical element--that is, if I attach the right meaning to those words--undetermined by anything external to the agent. Of course it is impossible to attempt to imagine the <u>way</u> of creation, but wherever from an absolute first a second appears, <u>there</u> it must be;--and it must be magical, for if in the second there be anything coequal or coeval with the first, it becomes pantheism.[4]

If a bright and hard-headed writing teacher were to receive this specimen as the core of a paper, he might well fail it. One can easily be stunned by the vocabulary, but after one gets over that, it becomes rather clear that young William is playing a game with definitions. If a creation is not pantheistic, that is to say, merely another manifestation of the substance of the Creator, then it must have been created arbitrarily out of nothing, and that (dear father) is magic. The teacher would in all likelihood feel driven

in exasperation to ask what the writer "means" by creation, pantheism and magic--not just the definition (I can read, thank you), but in a "real sense." Indeed, young William seems to be giving his father a bit of lip.

Burke, of course, would give the passage an "A." The last three sentences sound like something from a Burkeian lexicon--"ratio, equation, circumference, term, motive, magical, agent and absolute." But before we decide to terminate Burke's contract as a teacher in our writing program on the grounds that he merely wants his students to feed him back his own jargon, we must at least read the ten dense pages in A Grammar of Motives in which he explores some of the implications of the passage as a justification of his attention, and as a justification of an actional view of composition.

Burke begins by admitting that if the passage is read for information, narrative or exposition, it will appear largely incomprehensible. If the validity of James' conclusions depends on contrived definitions, to put the matter in logical terms, he clearly falls into the trap of failing to justify his premises. Thus there is no ground for information to be exchanged. On the other hand, Burke finds in the passage something even more important: a "chart of terms," a game, an exploration of meanings that is of profound importance in clarifying and validating the terminology one uses to explore the idea of creation, of

beginnings. Explorations of this sort are very important, for they are the basis of the discussion process. They are the means whereby the student fills out and verifies his understanding of language in general, and specific terms in particular. James's letter is important for the writing teacher to confront because it is a classic example of the kind of explorative writing that is the most important kind of student writing--writing that exercises the learning process.

* *

Now, let us stand back for a moment and take a historical perspective. William James and Burke occupy a good deal of common ground, particularly in the importance the subject of "beginnings" has for both of them. As a Swedenborgian, Henry James, Sr. drew an Augustinian distinction between Nature and God, between the divine and human arts and sciences. On one level, young William is doing a bit of gentle taunting here by showing how, rightly considered, language simply doesn't support his father's position, yet religious matters were a persistent concern for William throughout his career.[5] Pragmatism insists on a kind of empirical verification for any truth--natural or theological--and thus argues that a belief in the transcendental ground of theological truth is mere tender-mindedness. However, empirical validation is not as constrained a method as it

is for the logical positivist. Whereas the positivist would find a dogma meaningless simply because the dogma lacks empirical verification, the pragmatist accepts the dogma as meaningful if belief in the dogma effects a change in a person's life. So, if William is taunting his father, the game he is playing is a very serious one that serves to explore the ways what we know depends on what we can say, and if I am right in hearing irony in the passage, it is there as much for the balance of mind in the son is for the disarming of his father.

Burke's stance is quite similar to James's here. In his discussion of the passage, Burke focuses particularly on the idea of magic. One has to appreciate the irony of Burke's discussing the causes of motivation and behavior--surely two of the most central subjects of our time--in terms of magic--which is probably the most outre'. He allows, of course, that if magic is understood as a suspension of the rules of physical motion, it is false. We don't really think that the magician really makes that pigeon or ace of spades out of nothing. However, if magic is understood as operating outside the rules of motion, it is true and essential, for it involves the interpretation of motion as determined by intention, will, hope or expectation. We enjoy the magic show at least in part as an art that teases our shared belief in the objectivity of appearances. Magic and ritual thus concern the relation between attitude and event, and as such offer a broader basis for understanding an event than

is available to the positivist. For James and Burke, language is a map of the mind in ways it simply cannot be for the behaviorist, but as it should be for the writing teacher who is serious about the arts of language.

Burke calls his approach "logological." Logology is concerned with how words act, rather than with their "content." This shift of focus has interesting results, as can be best seen in another paragraph example. Near the end of his ten-page discussion of the James passage, Burke undertakes the seemingly bizarre (but wholly characteristic) exercise of translating James's abstract argument into even more abstract terms.

> We are reasoning as follows: We are saying that, to study the nature of the term, act, one must select a prototype, or paradigm of action. This prototype we find in the conception of a perfect or total act, such as the act of "the Creation." examining this concept, we find that it is "magic," for it produces something out of nothing. This enables us to equate magic with novelty--and leads us to look for a modicum of magic in every act to the extent that the act possesses a modicum of novelty. This consideration also admonishes us, however, to make a distinction between "true" and "false" magic. "False" magic is a quasiscientific ideal that would suspend the laws of motion, as in the attempt to coerce natural forces by purely ritualistic means. "True" magic is an aspect not of motion but of action. And if the motives properly assignable to scene, agent, agency and purpose are already given, there could be novelty only if we could also assign motives under the heading of act itself. That is, there would be something new intrinsic to the act: and this novelty would be the modicum of motivation assignable under the heading of act rather than under the heading of the four other terms, singly or in combination. There must, in brief, be some respect in which the act is a causa sui, a motive of itself.[6]

Any reader who is reading this paragraph for information

would probably feel a strong motive to throw it into the fire. After he has cut through all the jargon, the only recognizeable content he could distill is that creation is magic, that magic is novelty, and finally that every act possesses a bit of magic in it. The tough-minded empiricist might well snort, "What about picking your teeth?"

Of course, the dedicated textual scholar of Burke's works would quickly respond by noting that in quoting the passage I have omitted the first two sentences of the paragraph:

> But what precisely is our point? What are we trying to prove by an example that, we freely grant, cannot be adduced as the literal foundation of an argument?

The first sentence adopts the average reader's frustration with the argument, and the second in effect tells him that, if he expects a positive or empirical foundation for the argument, he is reading wrong. And then again, what does Burke mean by using the word "literal" for my alternatives in the previous sentence--"positive" or "empirical?" By teasing us out of thought in this way, Burke simply denies the absolute need for "validity" in the logical sense of the term. Burke's language is not "referring" to a world, it is "creating" one that extends and tests the limits of our skill, capacity and sophisitication in the use of language. The reader has passed Burke's examination if he can respond with a coherent critique.

Once the reader accepts the logological attitude, however, he should find it fairly easy to appreciate the art and eloquence of Burke's translation. The language is infused with action. There is a dramatic interplay of thinker and ideas: the thinker is exhorted--he must select, equate, look, make and assign--while the ideas produce, enable, possess, admonish and suspend. This density of rhetorical figurativeness is more than merely play; the words embody prayer and magic. William Rueckert is clearly right to place Burke in the critical tradition of such "stylists" as Emerson and James,[7] for like them, Burke is deeply entranced by the antinomianism implicit in the operations of language, and its capacity to create and reconstruct the world. However, this is not so much "a world elsewhere," in Richard Poirier's somewhat misleading phrase,[8] but those worlds whose construction is the writer's and student's need and responsibility. The question is not whether we live in the world of reality or the world of imagination, it is whether we live in our own world, or have merely "bought in" on the world articulated by someone else.

Then, there is an even more important point to be made here. A verbal world that is so alive to the drama of word choice is much more open to discovery, insight and learning than is the verbal world of language as mechanics. The logological writer is engaged in the whole language process rather than merely working syntactical and formal conventions.

When we teach merely syntax and paragraph structure, we are not teaching writing, and since such simple topics essentially involve merely social conventions, they have no clear relation to an education in the liberal arts, or to significant growth in understanding. When the writing teacher allows himself to be beguiled by the apparent ease of teaching mechanics in isolation, he fails to notice that he undermines his own purposes and the motivation of the students. Work in mechanics needs to be strongly subordinated to the communicative and logological functions of language. Thus, writing exercises that engage the whole language process-exercises in such dialectical processes as translation and transformation are a much more important propaedeutic to training in the language arts than are the drill-book exercises in the formal conventions of grammar, logic and rhetoric that dominate the handbooks of nineteenth and twentieth century composition teaching.

What I am saying here may sound rather esoteric and even bizarre to many present-day teachers of writing, but my point about the propaedutic value of dialectical exercises is nothing new, as any student of Aristotle would know. For Aristotle, the study of rhetoric was not tied to grammar and mechanics so much as it was to dialectic. His emphasis in both the Rhetoric and the Topics (his discussion of dialectic--i.e., argument from probable and conventional premises) is on invention, rather than on form, and this

area of classical rhetoric, as the new rhetoricians have been saying over and over again, has been grievously ignored in the teaching of rhetoric in composition classes. Kenneth Burke is the contemporary writer on language who seems to me to have most deeply understood this point, and thus his works provide the writing teacher with the most easily available route to an understanding of this basic point and an escape from the provinciality of the thought that has isolated American thinking in rhetoric and composition ~~and rhetoric~~ from the classical age, but also from the continental tradition of dialectical thinking.

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Notes

[1]A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1969), p. 21.

[2]See Burke's chapter on "Motives" in Permanence and Change (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 19-36.

[3]William Rueckert suggests fundamental conceptual similarities between Burke and the transformational-generative grammarians in "Kenneth Burke and Structuralism," (Shenandoah, 21, 1 (1969)), p. 23.

[4]Grammar, p. 62.

[5]For example, see William James, Pragmatism (Cleveland: Meridiqn, 1970), the second and last chapters.

[6]Grammar, p. 66.

[7]Rueckert, Critical Responses to Kenneth Burke, 1924-1966 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1968), p. 322.

[8]A World Elsewhere, the Place of Style in American Literature (New York: Oxford, 1066).